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SUBJECT: NATO-GEORGIA COMMISSION EXAMINES NEXT STEPS FOR
GEORGIA

Classified By: Classified by: Ambassador Kurt Volker for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During the February 4 NATO-Georgia Commission Meeting, Allies were united in support of Georgia's territorial integrity. Allies also stressed their desire to see Tbilisi advance its domestic reforms and to make maximum use of the recently agreed Annual National Program process. Georgia's Foreign, Defense, and Integration Ministers did a good job laying out their reform priorities. Without dwelling on it, they also updated Allies on the situation on the ground following the August war and requested additional medical support for some of the injured. They also pledged to make a contribution to NATO's ISAF operation later in the year. In a bilateral meeting with Ambassador Volker before the NGC, Foreign Minister Vashadze and Integration Minister Baramidze disagreed on whether Russia was likely to launch a second invasion of Georgia in order to finish the job it had started in August. END SUMMARY

12. (C) FM Grigol Vashadze, Integration Minister Giorgi Baramidze, and Defense Minister Vasil Sikharulidze represented Georgia in the February 4 session of the NATO-Georgia Commission. The meeting was convened to review NATO's November 2008 assessment of Georgia's Individual Partnership Action Plan, as well as to discuss the future direction of the relationship between Georgia and the Alliance.

NGC meeting: Georgia is on the Correct Path

13. (C) During the NGC meeting, FM Vashadze outlined his government's priorities: democratic reform; economic performance; a closer relationship with the EU; and NATO integration. He welcomed the content of NATO's IPAP assessment as a good picture of the further improvements Georgia must carry make.

14. (C) Vashadze observed his country had paid a high price for its vision since independence, arguing that Russia never intended to allow a free Georgia. He said Moscow was committed to blocking the emergence of a democratic Georgia, preventing transit of energy, and reestablishing political dominance in the region. He underlined Georgia's commitment to resolving conflicts under OSCE principles through the Geneva talks, and pledged to continue to support the EU's monitoring mission (EUMM), as underlined by Georgia's self imposed limitations in the zones near the boundaries with

South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Vashadze said that EUMM should be given full access on both sides of the boundary lines. Vashadze also pledged Georgia's support to the establishment of a liaison office in Tbilisi and promised Georgia's new Annual National Plan would soon be ready for presentation to Allies.

15. (C) Baramidze's remarks updated PermReps on Georgia's internal democratic reforms. DM Sikharulidze committed Georgia to further defense reforms, thanked Allies for their support, and requested additional assistance for the medical rehabilitation of 55 wounded in the August conflict. He also pledged that Georgia would make an operational contribution to ISAF in 2009.

16. (C) All Allies expressed support for Georgia's territorial integrity. Ambassador Volker applauded the Georgians for taking steps to reduce tensions in boundary areas. At the same time, he noted that Allies needed to continue to work together to press for full implementation of the ceasefire, as well as for full access for international monitors. France expressed support for the Geneva process. Latvia called for EUMM access to all of Georgia, while Lithuania said Russia was not behaving in accordance with the ceasefire agreements. The Czech Republic highlighted EU concern about Russian plans to build bases in Abkhazia. While Italy professed similar concern, it thought that NATO should pursue this matter through discussions with Russia. Poland pledged to support Georgian reforms. The Netherlands asked for an update on the IDP situation. When Germany called on Georgia to allow Russian inspection of Georgian installations

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under the Vienna Document, the Georgians said that this was not a suggestion they could do at this time.

7.(C) Ambassador Volker joined other Allies in stressing the need for Georgia to continue to pursue a reform agenda, making the most of the recently agreed Annual National Plan process. (Note: Allies recently agreed the modalities for the ANPs; Georgia will now use those modalities to construct their own national plan for reforms over the next year.) Romania and Germany highlighted the need for improvements in press freedoms, while Italy called for improvements in Georgia's internal political dialogue. Germany-joined by Denmark-also raised concerns about judicial freedoms and parliamentary culture. The UK focused on electoral reform. Canada also asked about the Georgia's economic outlook.

18. (C) In response to these comments, FM Vashadze cautioned Allies not to be too distracted by the issue of Russia's proposed naval base in Abkhazia. He said that several other bases were being constructed and they were not receiving enough attention. He announced that those concerned with the outbreak of the August war should consider checking the Georgian parliament's website which contains the parliamentary commission's findings on how the conflict began. Vashadze also highlighted humanitarian concerns, saying tens of thousands were unable to travel out of separatist regions to Georgia and were still subject to ethnic cleansing. Finally he pledged that Georgia would make good use of the ANP process.

Bilateral: Is Tbilisi the next to fall?

19. (C) In a bilateral meeting with Ambassador Volker before the NGC, all three ministers expressed continuing concerns about Russian actions, particularly in light of the tepid response to the August crisis from the international community. They were particularly worried about comments by French President Sarkozy in late 2008 that had claimed Russian was implementing the ceasefire agreement. Baramidze was the most alarmist, arguing that Russia, having concluded Europe would not respond, might launch an invasion of Georgia

in order to finish the job. He said the tempting targets of Tbilisi and key pipelines lay only "one tank's drive" from the Russian forces. While FM Vashadze criticized Russian implementation--or lack thereof--of the 6-point ceasefire agreement, he strongly disagreed with Baramidze's analysis. He said that he thought that there was no Russian intent to invade Georgia at this time, arguing somewhat hyperbolically that Russians really cared more about domestic issues--such as the Eurovision song contest--than about foreign adventures. At the same time, he asked that the United States consider sharing intelligence directly with UK and French EU monitors who lacked sufficient information to grasp the full extent of Russian ceasefire violations.

¶10. (C) Ambassador Volker expressed skepticism that Russia could be confident of a European willingness to look away in the case of any further Russian advances into Georgia, and he urged Georgia not be provoked. He noted the United States would continue to work with Allies to raise the costs to Russia for negative conduct. Volker also underlined that continued good conduct by the Georgian side in the Geneva talks had the effect of forcing European nations to regularly repeat their support for Georgia's territorial integrity, thereby preventing any slippage on this point in European policy.

¶11. (C) Comment: The Georgian ministers, particularly Vashadze, did a good job in this meeting with the Allies. They came prepared to take questions, rather than just give speeches, and projected both a command of the issues and an understanding of some Allies' concerns relating to the NATO enlargement process. They were largely constructive and pragmatic, an approach that will pay them dividends if they repeat it when presenting Georgia's first ANP to NATO. End comment.
VOLKER